



## "CLIL, an elitist language learning approach? A background analysis of English and Dutch CLIL pupils in French-speaking Belgium"

Van Mensel, Luk ; Hiligsmann, Philippe ; Mettewie, Laurence ; Galand, Benoît

### ABSTRACT

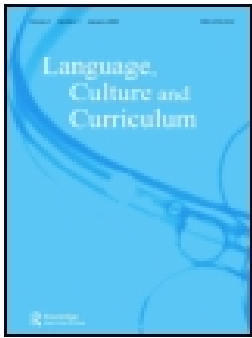
Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programmes are increasingly popular throughout Europe, but are sometimes accused of inducing a selection bias in the pupil population, both through selection mechanisms of the schools themselves and self-selection of the pupils (and/or their parents). As a result, the outcomes of the CLIL approach may be artificially promoted, and, at the same time, such a selection bias can contribute to an elitist education model, which arguably runs counter to the aims of the approach. This paper looks into a number of background variables of both English and Dutch CLIL learners in Francophone Belgium and compares them to their non-CLIL counterparts. Results from a logistic regression indicate that there is indeed evidence of selection: the socio-economic status of the pupils appears as the main predictor of whether a pupil is in a CLIL or a non-CLIL track, whereas other, more personal, variables such as non-verbal intelligence play a minor (or additional) role. Moreover, Dutch CLIL programmes appear to be more selective than English CLIL programmes in this context. We conclude that CLIL (and particularly Dutch CLIL) in French-speaking Belgium, although a priori open to anyone, is particularly attractive to a socially privileged public.

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# CLIL, an elitist language learning approach? A background analysis of English and Dutch CLIL pupils in French-speaking Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programmes are increasingly popular throughout Europe, but are sometimes accused of inducing a selection bias in the pupil population, both through selection mechanisms of the schools themselves and self-selection of the pupils (and/or their parents). As a result, the outcomes of the CLIL approach may be artificially promoted, and, at the same time, such a selection bias can contribute to an elitist education model, which arguably runs counter to the aims of the approach. This paper looks into a number of background variables of both English and Dutch CLIL learners in Francophone Belgium and compares them to their non-CLIL counterparts. Results from a logistic regression indicate that there is indeed evidence of selection: the socio-economic status of the pupils appears as the main predictor of whether a pupil is in a CLIL or a non-CLIL track, whereas other, more personal, variables such as non-verbal intelligence play a minor (or additional) role. Moreover, Dutch CLIL programmes appear to be more selective than English CLIL programmes in this context. We conclude that CLIL (and particularly Dutch CLIL) in French-speaking Belgium, although a priori open to anyone, is particularly attractive to a socially privileged public.

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## Introduction

The success of CLIL and CLIL-type programmes throughout Europe runs parallel with a growing interest among the public and researchers for innovative foreign and second language teaching methods. However, the rapidly growing popularity of the CLIL approach comes with a number of drawbacks, one of them being a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term. Cenoz, Genesee, and Gorter (2014) argue that, while CLIL is often presented by its advocates as unique with respect to other approaches to bilingual education, such as immersion or content-based instruction, the internal variety of interpretations given to the term CLIL makes such statements hard to uphold, and the pedagogical uniqueness of the approach remains to be elucidated. Indeed, the particular implementation of CLIL may come in many guises, and throughout Europe a range of different implementations can be found (see e.g. Sylén, 2013). Most researchers and

practitioners would agree on the core tenet of CLIL, i.e. the teaching of (part of the) curricular content through the medium of a second or foreign language (Dalton-Puffer, 2011), but the further particulars of the implementation of the CLIL approach can differ, in part because this implementation depends upon the national curriculum, which varies widely throughout Europe (Hüttner & Smit, 2014). Critical voices have also questioned the celebratory tone pervading much discourse on CLIL, mainly in the public sphere but also in parts of the research community, arguing that it is too soon to claim the solely beneficial effects of the approach (see in particular Bruton, 2011, 2013, 2015; Dallinger, Jonkmann, Hollm, & Fiege, 2016). Scholars are therefore calling for a more rigorous and critical research programme, 'in order to better identify its strengths and weaknesses in different learning contexts' (Cenoz et al., 2014, p. 258; see also Coyle, 2007; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, & Smit, 2010).

Another important critique that is often voiced relates to the possibly skewed composition of the CLIL pupil population. Advocates claim that the approach is open to all learners, including those from less privileged backgrounds, and is thus in principle more egalitarian than other types of bilingual education such as those provided in private schools (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Hüttner & Smit, 2014; Lorenzo, Casal, & Moore, 2010). Yet other scholars suggest that CLIL tends to attract a larger group of bright students who are motivated to succeed academically, be it in the foreign language or not (Mehisto, 2007). Even if both critics and champions agree that there is nothing inherently discriminatory about CLIL (Hüttner & Smit, 2014), Bruton (2015, p. 124) argues that there is evidence from different contexts that many CLIL programmes are *de facto* selective in one way or another, the precise way depending on the national educational context. Besides possibly impacting the results of CLIL (research) in an artificially positive way, (self-)selection processes can contribute to an elitist educational model, in many cases adding yet another layer to other already existing national selection levels (for examples, see Apse, 2012; Broca, 2016; Duru-Bellat, 2002; Rumlich, 2014).

With this general discussion in mind, we wish to focus on the context of French-speaking Belgium, which provides a fitting context to investigate those issues. After a discussion of the scarce data available on issues of selection and elitism regarding CLIL in this specific context, we compare the composition of the CLIL and non-CLIL cohorts involved in a large-scale project on CLIL in French-speaking Belgium in terms of a number of background factors. The availability of two different CLIL programmes (English and Dutch) in our sample provides us with an additional analytical lens.

## CLIL in French-speaking Belgium

In Francophone Belgium, CLIL programmes in Dutch, English or German have been officially allowed since 1998, first in primary school and then progressively in secondary education. The number of schools offering a CLIL track has steadily increased since, with around 190 primary schools and over a hundred secondary schools according to the most recent figures, hosting about 6% of the pupil population (Hilgsmann et al., 2017). Legislation is such that schools are provided a great deal of flexibility with regard to the actual implementation of the CLIL programme, for instance in terms of the number of classes offered in the target language, the starting point, or the curriculum. It should be mentioned that this flexibility was intentionally factored into the legislation;

policy makers did not wish to impose a ‘one size fits all’-framework. However, because of the structure of the Belgian educational system, support from the different official educational bodies varies substantially, and schools as well as teachers are often left much to their own devices regarding teacher training, the development of specific teaching materials, or the development of the pupils’ language competences (Chopey-Paquet, 2008). The flexibility offered by the policy makers has led to a range of CLIL options throughout French-speaking Belgium. In this sense, one may be inclined to speak about CLILs rather than CLIL, an observation that echoes the variety of its implementation in Europe. Also, and following the terminology that was used in the first Decree allowing for CLIL in French-speaking Belgium in 1998 (*‘enseignement de type immersif’*), the term ‘immersion’ has entered the lexicon of policy makers, the general public, as well as certain scholars (as can be observed in the quotes below), and is now frequently used interchangeably with CLIL, thus illustrating the above-mentioned lack of conceptual clarity surrounding these terms. For a detailed overview of the particularities of CLIL in Francophone Belgium, and an extensive review of research conducted on CLIL in Francophone Belgium, we can refer to Hilgsmann et al. (2017). One point worth highlighting for the present contribution is that, in contrast to the situation in other countries (e.g. the Netherlands, see Maljers, 2007, or Germany, see Rumlich, 2016a), official selection procedures are not permitted, and pupils are – or should be – enrolled according to the chronological order of enrolment.<sup>1</sup>

If CLIL has been accused of catering mainly to an elite pupil population and/or effectively contributing to maintaining an elite pupil population, such a charge has also been voiced within the context of Francophone Belgium. Wattiez (2006; in De Longueville, 2010, p. 29, our translation), for instance, states that ‘Immersion education is elitist and increases inequality, benefiting only a small part of the population’, and Beheydt (2007; in Boury, 2008, p. 32, our translation) argues with respect to Dutch CLIL in particular that ‘immersion [...] could create a gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’: the bilingual elite who, thanks to their highly motivated parents, have received a bilingual education, and the rest who must continue to struggle in Dutch.’ In the research literature on CLIL in Francophone Belgium, which mainly focuses on the (linguistic) outcomes of the pupils, little mention is made of these contentious issues. If they are mentioned, the discussion is not based on empirical evidence, but rather on impressions and occasional observations. In fact, the most thorough explorations of this issue can be found in a number of master’s theses. De Longueville (2010), for instance, discusses three different types of possible selection processes: (a) a psycho-/sociolinguistic selection, excluding children with learning deficiencies, auditory problems, language learning disorders (such as for instance dyslexia) and probably also those children without sufficient knowledge of the dominant societal language (French), which in practice refers to children from a recent immigration background; (b) a geographical selection, since even if the number of schools offering CLIL is rising steadily, many families may still live too far away; (c) a socioeconomic and sociocultural selection. In French-speaking Belgium, as mentioned earlier, CLIL is in principle open to all pupils and no extra fees are to be paid, so the rationale behind this last selection process needs some explaining.

In fact, the current education system in Belgium can be considered a ‘quasi market’ (Dumay & Dupriez, 2008): (1) schools receive a certain amount of money per pupil and are thus financially dependent on the number of pupils they attract, and (2) families are

(to some extent<sup>2</sup>) free to choose which school they wish to send their child to, which has allowed for the emergence of popular vs. non-popular schools. In such a context of '*concurrence scolaire*' (competition between schools, Blondin, 2006), a CLIL programme may thus function as an asset enhancing the school's reputation, and provide the school with a marketing advantage over neighbouring (and competing) schools. It is suggested that CLIL schools can attract better pupils, since educated parents find it much easier to play the role of 'informed consumers' (Dauphin & Verhoeven, 2002) in the system of a quasi market. In a discussion of foreign language education in Belgium, Hambye (2009, pp. 35–36, our translation) argues the following with regard to CLIL:

To the extent that they [CLIL schools] attract only certain categories of families (rather invested in schooling, rather confident in the academic success of their children, necessarily informed of the various training opportunities, etc.), immersion functions as a filter that guarantees parents that their children will find themselves a priori with 'good' pupils. Parents who choose immersion therefore do not necessarily or not only seek to acquire linguistic capital from their children, but also, or above all, to provide them with a favorable school environment.<sup>3</sup>

Note that this line of reasoning resembles what we discussed above regarding criticism at the international level, namely that there is nothing inherently discriminatory about CLIL, but that it may work as a selective device when implemented in some schools and not others. However, this author does not provide any empirical evidence for his claim, and, as mentioned, actual research into these matters is scarce and fragmented.

In a discussion of various aspects related to an evaluation of the first CLIL programmes in French-speaking Belgium, Blondin and Straeten (2002) and Blondin (2003) state that they could not find any evidence of elitist selection. However, these contentions are based on conversations with stakeholders that are potentially interested parties on this subject (such as school principals) and should therefore be considered with caution. On the other hand, Boury (2008, pp. 31–32) reports on school teachers attesting to an unofficial selection that would take place at the intake level, i.e. a selection by school teachers on the basis of previous school results, for instance. The question as to whether such policies are widespread or isolated events remains unanswered. An example of an auto-selection mechanism that is reported on in the literature is the impression among parents that 'learning content matter in another language' is difficult, and so that the parents of lower achieving children – in terms of general school outcomes – may believe their children stand little chance in a CLIL environment. De le Vingne (2014, p. 74) reports this aspect as one of the main reasons why parents opt to not enrol their children in a CLIL programme ( $n = 60$  parents from four schools in an urban area). Finally, regarding the 'mercantile' character of CLIL programmes for schools, De le Vingne (2014, p. 24) reports on a school director admitting to having implemented a CLIL programme in order to attract more pupils. Buyl and Housen (2014, p. 193) also attest to 'the use of immersion education by some schools as a 'marketing tactic' (i.e. some schools would opt for immersion education primarily with the aim of attracting more and also 'better' or more 'elitist' pupils).' But again, these statements are not based on any systematic data, at least not reported on in the publications, and it remains to be seen to what extent they can be generalised.

In sum, we can hear echoes of opponents and proponents of CLIL education in these different statements. Many of the misgivings, however justified they may turn out to be, seem to be based on impressions and anecdotal observations, as are the positive stories in this regard. In what follows, we propose an analysis of a range of background parameters of the CLIL and non-CLIL cohorts involved in a large-scale project on CLIL in French-speaking Belgium. Our main aim is to verify whether the conceptions regarding the possible elitist nature of CLIL in French-speaking Belgium hold some truth, and if so, which factors best inform whether a pupil is likely to be in a CLIL class or not. Additionally, since we know from previous research that attitudes towards English and Dutch may differ considerably among Belgian pupils, English being a very popular language whereas Dutch (in this case the language of the ‘other’ community) is often regarded as dull, yet necessary for instrumental reasons (Lochtman, Lutjeharms, & Kermarrec, 2005; Mettewie, 2015), we will examine whether any differences can be found according to the target language (CLIL English vs. CLIL Dutch).

### Method: sample & measures

The data we use for our analysis were collected between October 2015 and May 2017 within the framework of a large multidisciplinary and longitudinal research project on CLIL in Francophone Belgium (Hilgsmann et al., 2017). Over 900 pupils from 13 primary and 9 secondary schools in different parts of French-speaking Belgium (with the exception of officially bilingual Brussels) participated in this project. The CLIL pupils had either Dutch or English as a target language, and the non-CLIL pupils had either Dutch or English as their ‘first’ foreign language option in the curriculum (for more details, see Hilgsmann et al., 2017). The pupils in our sample were at the start of grade 5 or 11, which is the penultimate year of primary school (mean age 10.5) and secondary school (mean age 16.5), respectively, and the majority of the CLIL pupils had been in a CLIL programme since the final year of kindergarten or the first year of primary school (primary school sample) and the first year of secondary school (secondary school sample). The participating schools have contrasting profiles, notably in terms of location (all provinces are covered), education authority (official education and publicly subsidised schools), and socio-economic level. The so-called social index (*indice social*) of the participating schools, providing a rough indication of the school population’s socio-economic background, ranges (on a scale from 1 to 20) from 8 to 20 (mean 13.9, median 13) for the primary schools in our sample and from 6 to 20 (mean 12.8, median 11) for the secondary schools in our sample.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that all secondary pupils in our sample follow the general education track, as CLIL education in Francophone Belgium is hardly organised in technical or vocational tracks.<sup>5</sup> Also, it has been suggested that in order to make statements about CLIL vs. non-CLIL (particularly with respect to language and content assessment), data should be collected from non-CLIL pupils in schools that do not offer both options – in order to avoid a possible bias in the non-CLIL pupil population (Möller, 2016; Rumlich, 2016b). We did not include any ‘non-CLIL only’ schools in our sample, mainly because of practical reasons, given the already large size of our sample. Finally, as mentioned, the pupils in our sample were at the start of grade 5 or 11, which entails they may have had between a minimum of four years of CLIL education (i.e. those in grade 5 who started in grade 1) and a maximum of eleven years of CLIL education (i.e. those in grade 11 who started in the final



year of kindergarten). As a consequence, we cannot make any statements on possible selection processes at the intake level; we can only provide a picture of the pupil composition at this particular point, which can however display traces of earlier (self-)selection processes (whether at the intake level, through gradual drop-out, or as a combination of both).

We used the following variables to gauge the composition of the CLIL and non-CLIL groups: (a) the highest level of education of the mother as a proxy for socio-economic status (SES, cf. Duru-Bellat, 2002), subdivided in three categories: low (primary and secondary school), medium (higher education outside university), and high (university degree); (b) the household structure; (c) school success, measured by whether a pupil has never had to repeat a school year; and (d) the pupils' non-verbal intelligence, measured through a computerised version of the Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (Raven, Court, & Raven, 1998; see also Simonis et al., [accepted](#)). This test requires pupils to identify the patterned segment – out of six possible ones – that provides the missing piece in a larger visuo-spatial pattern. An ancillary analysis included a fifth variable: the pupils' receptive L1 vocabulary knowledge as a proxy for verbal intelligence. This variable was measured through a computerised version of EVIP, the French version of the Peabody vocabulary test (Dunn, Thériault-Whalen, & Dunn, 1993). This standardised test consists of a series of four-picture sets from which the participants need to select the drawing corresponding to a word they hear. The first and second variables were obtained through a parental questionnaire that was distributed and collected via the schools at the beginning of the project (September-October 2015). The third variable was obtained through a student questionnaire which was administered by the researchers during the first data collection in the schools (October 2015). The scores of the fourth (and fifth) variables were obtained during the first round of computerised data collection, which took place in November 2015 in the university computer rooms and which was supervised by the researchers. In addition to our main analyses, we will also briefly report on a survey question we asked the CLIL pupils about whose decision it was to enrol in a CLIL programme (i.e. their parents' or their own) and who decided on the target language. [Table 1](#) displays the questionnaires used for gathering the data reported on in the present article, the number of valid respondents, how the questionnaires were submitted, and the breakdown of the figures according to the categories relevant to our analysis.

**Table 1.** Number of questionnaires within various subsamples.

			CLIL		Non-CLIL	
			Dutch <sup>a</sup>	English <sup>b</sup>	Dutch <sup>c</sup>	English <sup>d</sup>
Parent questionnaires (valid $n = 785$ )	Distributed and collected via schools	Primary (grade 5)	156	87	64	78
		Secondary (grade 11)	132	83	106	79
Pupil questionnaires (valid $n = 896$ )	Collected in schools	Primary (grade 5)	174	102	68	97
		Secondary (grade 11)	140	100	113	102

<sup>a</sup>CLIL with Dutch as the target language

<sup>b</sup>CLIL with English as the target language

<sup>c</sup>Non-CLIL with specific foreign languages curricular option in Dutch (4 h/week)

<sup>d</sup>Non-CLIL with specific foreign languages curricular option in English (4 h/week)

## Results

### Descriptives

The figures in [Table 2](#) (primary and secondary education, English and Dutch together) suggest that there are indeed important differences between both groups: pupils in the



**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics.

	CLIL	Non-CLIL
SES (%) - <i>N</i>	448	309
Low	15,6	39,5
Medium	36,4	35,9
High	48	24,6
Household structure (%) - <i>N</i>	511	377
Child lives with both parents	75,3	65,5
Child alternates between parents (co-parenting)	15,9	18,6
Single-parent mother	7,4	10,3
Single-parent father	0,6	3,7
Other	0,8	1,9
School success (%) - <i>N</i>	513	373
Grade retention – never	91,2	75,9
Grade retention – at least once	8,8	24,1
Non verbal intelligence (mean Raven score) - <i>N</i>	470	327
	37,37	36,31

CLIL group come from families with a higher SES, they live slightly less often with only one parent, only 8% report to have repeated at least one year (as opposed to almost 25% in the non-CLIL group), and their non-verbal intelligence is slightly higher.

As can be observed, some of the differences between both groups in this sample are rather striking, with the background of the CLIL pupils perhaps being the more ‘exceptional’ one. For instance, the figures representing the non-CLIL group’s school success are more or less in line with similar figures for the whole of the pupil population in French-speaking Belgium: at the end of primary school, around 20% of the pupils have at least repeated one year, and in grade 11 (general track) this figure rises to 26% for the girls and 37% for the boys (figures for school year 2013-2014; Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2016, p. 31).

### *CLIL or non-CLIL – analysis of the complete sample*

In order to determine which of these factors best discriminate whether a pupil is likely to be in a (non-)CLIL class, we conducted a logistic regression, which rendered the results in Table 3.

The background factors significantly associated with the likelihood for a pupil being in a CLIL class are his or her mother’s socio-economic status (incrementally) and whether the

**Table 3.** Results logistic regression (*n* = 679).

Variable	B		SE	OR
Constant	.020		.336	1.020
Raven	–.002	<i>ns</i>	.008	.998
SES				
Medium	.695	**	.210	2.003
High	1.351	***	.222	3.861
( <i>base = low</i> )				
Household structure		<i>ns</i>		
School success				
Grade retention – at least once	–1.014	***	.238	.363
( <i>base = never</i> )				
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	14.8%			
Hosmer & Lemeshow test	<i>p</i> = 0.266			
Classification accuracy	65.5%			

\**p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001, *ns* not significant

pupil has ever repeated a year. The pupil's non-verbal intelligence and the household structure do not significantly contribute to the model. Therefore, we can conclude for our overall sample (primary and secondary, English and Dutch together) that CLIL tracks attract a more privileged pupil population in terms of SES. Also, pupils who were retained at least once are significantly less likely to be found in a CLIL classroom at the present stage of their school career. At this point in the analysis, neither the pupils' non-verbal intelligence nor the household structure play an additional role.

If these observations seem to largely confirm the reputation of CLIL education in French-speaking Belgium as an 'elite' education, it should be pointed out that on the basis of this analysis we still cannot pinpoint the reasons for the discrepancies between the CLIL and the non-CLIL cohorts in terms of their background. Very likely, as mentioned before, a combination of various (self-)selection (non-institutional) processes may be at the root of the differences. In any case, we can observe that there is a segregation between CLIL and non-CLIL pupils, and that (in the 5th and 11th grade) CLIL education seems to coincide with education for/with 'successful' pupils from societally 'privileged' families.

### CLIL or non-CLIL – separate analysis for English and Dutch

Let us now look at whether the same observations can be made when looking at the data for English and Dutch separately (see Table 4).

When looking at the data for each target language group separately, we can observe some differences when compared to the previous analysis. Overall, the background profile of pupils in the Dutch CLIL track tends to display similar characteristics as those described above for the total sample, namely successful pupils from privileged families. However, beyond the differences for SES and school success, the Dutch CLIL pupils also live significantly less often in single-mother families than their non-CLIL counterparts, the latter situation often being related to more socio-economic adversities. Pupils who are in an English CLIL track on the other hand also live significantly more often in families

**Table 4.** Results logistic regression English ( $n=279$ ) and Dutch ( $n=400$ )

Variable	English				Dutch			
	B	SE	OR		B	SE	OR	
Constant	-.517	<i>ns</i>	.498	.596	.300	<i>ns</i>	.472	1.350
Raven	.009	<i>ns</i>	.013	1.009	-.006	<i>ns</i>	.011	.994
SES								
Medium	.618	*	.301	1.855	.730	*	.300	2.076
High	1.199	***	.340	3.318	1.433	***	.306	4.193
(base = low)								
Household structure		<i>ns</i>						
Child alternates between parents (co-parenting)					-.324		.320	.723
Single-parent mother					-1.160	**	.446	.313
Single-parent father					-2.094		1.155	.123
Other					+		+	+
(base = lives with both parents)								
School success								
Grade retention – at least once	-.466	<i>ns</i>	.346	.628	-1.615	***	.344	.199
(base = never)								
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	11%				21.2%			
Hosmer & Lemeshow test	$p = 0.862$				$p = 0.282$			
Classification accuracy	64.5%				70.8%			

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , + only 1 subject, *ns* not significant

with a high socio-economic status – although we should note the different Odds Ratios for the two languages, indicating an even larger impact of the SES variable for the Dutch sample. However, whether the English CLIL pupils have repeated (at least) one school year or not does not distinguish them from their non-CLIL counterparts. English CLIL therefore appears to be less selective in this sense compared to Dutch CLIL. As in the regression for the total sample discussed above, the variable non-verbal intelligence (Raven) does not significantly contribute to the model, suggesting that possible (self-)selection processes are not so much related to pupils' cognitive abilities (at least in terms of non-verbal reasoning) but rather to sociocultural and socio-economic factors.

### *CLIL or non-CLIL – ancillary analyses*

We also conducted the same analyses on the primary and secondary sample separately. The overall results for the primary sample (Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> 19.8%, Hosher & Lemeshow test .236, classification accuracy 72.8%) were the same as for the total sample, with SES and school success as the two significant predictors. Regarding the results for the secondary sample (Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> 17.4%, Hosher & Lemeshow test .214, classification accuracy 64.5%), the Raven variable appears as a significant predictor besides the two other elements mentioned above, indicating that (self-)selection processes in secondary education may be partly sustained/triggered by a consideration of pupils' cognitive abilities. We should note that there is another possible explanation for this observation, namely that the CLIL experience has enhanced the secondary school pupils' non-verbal reasoning, an option which is explored in Simonis et al. ([accepted](#)). At this point, however, it is hard to tell which of these two options is most plausible; further (longitudinal) analyses should be able to shed some light on the issue.

Since the Raven variable is only an indication of the pupils' *non-verbal* intelligence, one may object that (self-)selection processes are perhaps more related to another – verbal – type of intelligence. For instance, pupils displaying a greater language aptitude may be more often encouraged to enrol in the – allegedly more linguistically demanding – CLIL track. Therefore, we repeated the same analyses, this time adding a measure of pupils' receptive L1 vocabulary knowledge as a proxy for verbal intelligence.<sup>6</sup> No substantial differences were found in comparison with the previous results and the verbal intelligence variable was never a significant predictor. These results indicate that, indeed, (self-)selection processes are more related to socio-economic and socio-cultural factors than directly to cognitive factors. In other words, CLIL does not necessarily attract pupils who are 'smarter' or 'better at languages'; rather, the socio-economic background appears to be the most important determinant in distinguishing the CLIL from the non-CLIL pupil populations, followed by past schooling trajectory (absence or presence of grade retention).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these observations are even more significant for the Dutch target language sample, suggesting that in French-speaking Belgium, the Dutch CLIL track is more selective than the English CLIL track.

With this last point in mind, it may be worthwhile to mention the responses to a question we asked the CLIL pupils about whose decision it was to enrol in a CLIL programme: the pupil's, their parents', or both (see [Table 5](#)). As can be expected, the choice to enrol in a CLIL programme was more the pupils' decision in secondary than in primary. When we compare the Dutch and the English CLIL pupils, the percentages are somewhat

**Table 5.** Main actor in the decision to enrol in a CLIL programme, according to the CLIL pupils (student questionnaire,  $n = 514$ ), in percentages.

Subsample		Parents	Parents and pupil	Pupil
Primary	English ( $n = 102$ )	48	42.2	9.8
	Dutch ( $n = 172$ )	62.2	32.6	5.2
Secondary	English ( $n = 100$ )	18	48	34
	Dutch ( $n = 140$ )	19.3	62.9	17.9

different, suggesting a greater role for the parents of the Dutch CLIL pupils in the decision-making. Note that we asked the CLIL pupils the same question with regard to the choice of the target language, and this question yielded a similar response pattern.

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to compare the background of both English and Dutch CLIL learners with the background of their non-CLIL counterparts. Both groups are involved in a large-scale research project on CLIL in Francophone Belgium. Given the discussion that is conducted internationally regarding the possibly elitist character of CLIL education, and in light of similar concerns within the context of French-speaking Belgium, we deemed it worthwhile to investigate whether these concerns hold true for our sample. Overall, our analyses indicate that there are indeed significant differences between the two pupil populations under scrutiny, with the CLIL pupils living in families from a higher socio-economic background and pursuing smoother school trajectories for the most part. It should be stressed that these results reflect the learners' background after several years of CLIL, since the participating pupils were in grade 5 or 11 at the time of the data collection. The observations as such cannot tell us anything about the actual (self-)selection processes, for we do not know whether the (self-)selection takes place at the intake level, through gradual drop-out, or is a combination of both. However, the picture provided does suggest that CLIL in French-speaking Belgium, like in other international contexts (see Bruton, 2015), is – if not inherently discriminatory since it is open to everyone in principle as no selection procedures are allowed – de facto selective. In an education system with free school choice, as in French-speaking Belgium, the creation of CLIL sections in some schools but not in others seems to lead to the concentration of students with a specific background in these sections. Moreover, these observations are even more significant for the Dutch target language sample, suggesting that in French-speaking Belgium, the Dutch CLIL track is more selective than the English CLIL track.

If our sample does not enable us to say anything about how and when selection takes place, the analyses do allow us to identify the parameters that are more discriminant. Whereas socio-economic background appears to be the most important element in distinguishing the CLIL from the non-CLIL pupil populations, the cohorts do not differ in terms of their L1 proficiency nor with respect to their non-verbal reasoning. These results would support the idea of CLIL as not simply a selective but even elitist education model, since it clearly attracts pupils from better-off families albeit not pupils that are necessarily 'brighter'. Therefore, it may indeed be the case that, as suggested by Hambye (2009), CLIL schools in French-speaking Belgium are particularly attractive to those families that are already socially privileged and who wish to provide their children

with a favourable school environment in general, besides seeking to acquire linguistic capital. This appears to be even more the case for the Dutch CLIL programmes, and the figures regarding the role of the parents in the decision to enrol in a CLIL track do not contradict this impression.

The implications of these findings for research on the effects of CLIL are evident, in that background factors as SES and past achievement should be controlled for in any analyses. If we do not take the background of the pupils into account, any CLIL success stories would in fact turn out to be success stories about CLIL for the privileged (Dallinger et al., 2016). More generally, and more importantly, we should think about how to open up CLIL to a wider audience as one of the means to foster language learning, or to find other ways to achieve this aim for all pupils.

## Notes

1. See [http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/32365\\_003.pdf](http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/32365_003.pdf) (Art.6 §1, accessed 19 December 2017).
2. It should be mentioned that the educational authorities are looking for ways to regulate the 'quasi market', in order to counter social segregation through schooling. For details, see the '*décret inscriptions*' (enrolment decree, since 2007) and the '*décret de mixité sociale*' (social mix decree, since 2009) ([www.enseignement.be](http://www.enseignement.be)). However, a report from the Education Piloting Commission issued in 2014 (Rapport COPI, 2014) revealed that the measures currently applied are hardly effective (see also Danhier & Jacobs, 2017).
3. Interestingly, similar stories can be found with respect to Dutch-medium education in Brussels, where the good reputation of these schools (smaller, better funded, ...) is often the most important reason for non-Dutch-speaking parents to enroll their children in Dutch-medium education, even more important than the language of education (Dutch) (see Van Mensel, 2007).
4. The index, established in 2011 by the educational authorities, is based on a number of socio-economic criteria related to the neighborhood in which the pupils of a particular school reside. URL: [www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/36474\\_000.pdf](http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/36474_000.pdf).
5. See De Smet (2012) for a case study in an urban school offering CLIL in a technical track.
6. The scores obtained for this variable were within the expected range for the participants' age. Also, this variable correlated strongly with other L1 measures, such as a reading test and a writing test.
7. For the link between SES and grade retention, see e.g. Crahay (2013).

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